

Students' Playful Tactics

TEACHING AT THE INTERSECTION OF NEW MEDIA AND THE OFFICIAL CURRICULUM

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This article explores the tactics adolescents perform on virtual school spaces in a time when more and more teachers are choosing to adopt digital, social-networking platforms for curricular purposes.

As young people progress from preschool to puberty, many of them begin to replace their tangible toys with digital ones. Instead of playing dress-up with costumes in a chest, they find themselves experimenting with their identities by creating avatars to explore with (Lee & Hoadley, 2007). Instead of holding hands with their best friends at recess, they cultivate sophisticated social networks online, complete with photographs, status updates, and notes on walls (Larsen, 2007). It is no wonder that educators have found much potential in leveraging these rich social networking practices for classroom use (Bowers-Campbell, J., 2011; Doerr-Stevens, et al., 2011; Mills & Chandra, 2011).

Much of the literature to this date has well-documented the exemplary amount of classroom learning and bridge-building that can occur when teachers capitalize on students' enthusiasm and knowledge regarding out-of-school social networks (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and transfer them to virtual

learning networks (Tharp, 2010; Edmonson, 2012; Mortensen, 2009; Teng, 2012). Teachers describe juxtaposing "the old" (traditional curriculum) with "the new" (digital platforms) in exciting ways (Beach & O'Brien, 2009; Ostenson & Gleason-Sutton, 2011), thus enhancing both student engagement and student learning. Others emphasize the way that students are able to "write themselves" through social network participation identity practices (Danzak, 2011; Lam, 2009).

There is another story, however, worth examining, one that will resonate as very familiar to those teachers who have attempted to integrate new media platforms for classroom use. What tensions can result when the paradigms of Facebook or Twitter collide with traditional schooling (Hill & Vasudevan, 2008)? If it is true that new media enable students to authentically engage in identity work, what happens when a student's desired identity clashes with school-sanctioned identities (Ayers, 2011)? In other words, what lurks at the interplay between new media and the official curriculum, teacher purposes and student purposes?

Often, research around new media in classrooms revolves solely around the ways that it can fulfill the official curriculum requirements, what counts as



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learning in the discipline mandated by adopted standards, testing practices, school departments, policy-makers, and other stakeholders. This article, however, highlights the four-way interplay between teacher, students, the official curriculum, and new media. The heart of this collision was unearthed during a teacher-researcher partnership utilizing a Ning site created for English class. Ning (<http://www.ning.com/>) is a flexible community-sharing platform that offers typical social networking features (profile pictures, “likes,” status updates, blogs, and forums) that we used to parallel the experience adolescents have in many out-of-school social media sites. Data from the Ning reveal students’ digital *self-representation tactics*, the ways adolescents agentically and deliberately portray particular versions of self with images and text to an imagined audience. Specifically, this piece examines: *What tactics do students employ when representing themselves on a social networking site for class?*

This evidence reveals the tensions between academic purposes and social purposes that can result when students tactically make use of the affordances of this social networking platform for English class. Social media in school powerfully enables self-representations that diverge from the traditionally legitimized academic self which is marked by serious participation, formal conventions, and a distinct lack of engagement in the social identity play that marks students’ peer interaction. It is thus key for teachers to negotiate these tensions by utilizing their own tactics amid the constraints faced in classroom practice by re-imagining the kinds of participation that should be legitimized in English class spaces, directly confronting moments when students’ uses of new media silences other voices, and creating opportunities for students to critically analyze their own digital self-representation practices.

Theoretical Framework: Strategies and Tactics

My work draws on classroom-based social networking sites to make sense of students’ informal and virtual projection of selves within institutionalized schools promoting traditional curricula (Kirkland, 2009; Hirst, 2004/2011). Understanding identity management as both deliberate and social resonates with contemporary understandings of identity as “performance” (Goffman, 1959), and as multiple, evolving, and culturally influenced (Buckingham, 2007;

Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Nevertheless, it is clear that, in schools, certain identity practices and spaces are privileged (Hirst, 2004/2011). In this complex dance of self-representation, students are simultaneously *shaped by* and are agentically *shaping* the spaces they perform in.

Michel de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between *strategies* and *tactics* serves as a powerful theoretical frame that well-encapsulates the freedom amid constraints that students operationalize in classroom spaces. While *strategies* originate from subjects with power to create and produce socially established places and norms (oftentimes the teacher in classroom settings), *tactics* originate from those without traditional power (oftentimes the students), those that are forced to get around the rules and constraints they face by “poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (p. xii).

In this article, I situate students’ primary tactical purpose around identity work, so tactics here often take the form of pictures spontaneously uploaded, “likes” on a status update, blogs comments, or student-initiated forums. The distinction between tactical participation and pure agency or “freedom” is important to consider when researching classroom spaces, as it both fully recognizes that (a) students are often working, learning, and playing in spaces constructed for them and (b) their acts of participation “redistribute” this very space. Through this lens, sexual innuendos posted in blog comments or silly cat photos uploaded on the class photo gallery can be seen as

... innumerable ways of playing and foiling the [teacher’s]... game, that is, the space instituted by ... [the teacher] ... the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces. People have to make do with what they have ... there is a certain art of placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 18)

Strategies and tactics worked as powerful theoretical frames to add shape to the way I viewed teacher action (as primarily strategic and involving curricular standards) and student response (as primarily tactical and involving socially embedded identity practices). De Certeau’s theory also enabled me to examine the classroom space with a more precise eye for the contrast between the established “proper place” of school

and the ways students helped to remake the space to contain room for a portrayal of self that goes beyond traditional academic, student depictions. Finally, this framework gave me a precise way to describe the need for teachers to leap from just *strategic* leadership (maintaining the status quo) to *tactical* (eager to collaborate with students to reshape traditional classroom spaces.)

Methods

Context and Data Sources

As a former ELA teacher at the middle and high school level, I entered graduate school with strong memories of the challenge of integrating digital technology into the classroom; although students appeared to enjoy the entrance of cell phones or laptops into classroom spaces, they often had social purposes for the tools that superseded and/or interfered with my academic purposes. In order to investigate these tensions, I partnered with a practicing High School English teacher in the Midwestern part of the US to initiate a classroom social networking site (using the Ning platform) to be used in two face-to-face classrooms: American Literature I and English 10 Honors. Our goal was to continue teaching the same academic curricula established by the State's Standards and the school's English Department, but to do so

through the vehicle of new media rather than more traditional means.

For one semester, I spent two to three hours at the school, one to two times each week in order to co-teach, co-plan, observe, conduct personal interviews and focus groups, digitally record class discussions, engage in virtual discussions with students, and have in-depth reflections with the classroom teacher. For the purposes of this analysis, I drew largely on my 22 student participants' contributions on the Ning (see Figure 1), which occurred during class on the student computers (each student had their own computer built into their desk) and also outside of class at home. See Table 1 for a summary of the various uses of the Ning that semester.

My main analytic lens focused in on the ways the particular space of our classroom-based social networking site provoked socially-embedded identity practices (Lewis et al., 2007), which I conceptualized as "tactics" (de Certeau, 1984). In my emergent, qualitative analysis (Saldana, 2007), I first tracked student participation on the Ning space that I perceived as primarily student-initiated identity practices. I then looked across the gathered data to identify the particular tactics that students utilized in this manipulation of an academic space for their own identity purposes. My findings report the ways in which students'

FIGURE 1 Ning Site for American Literature Class

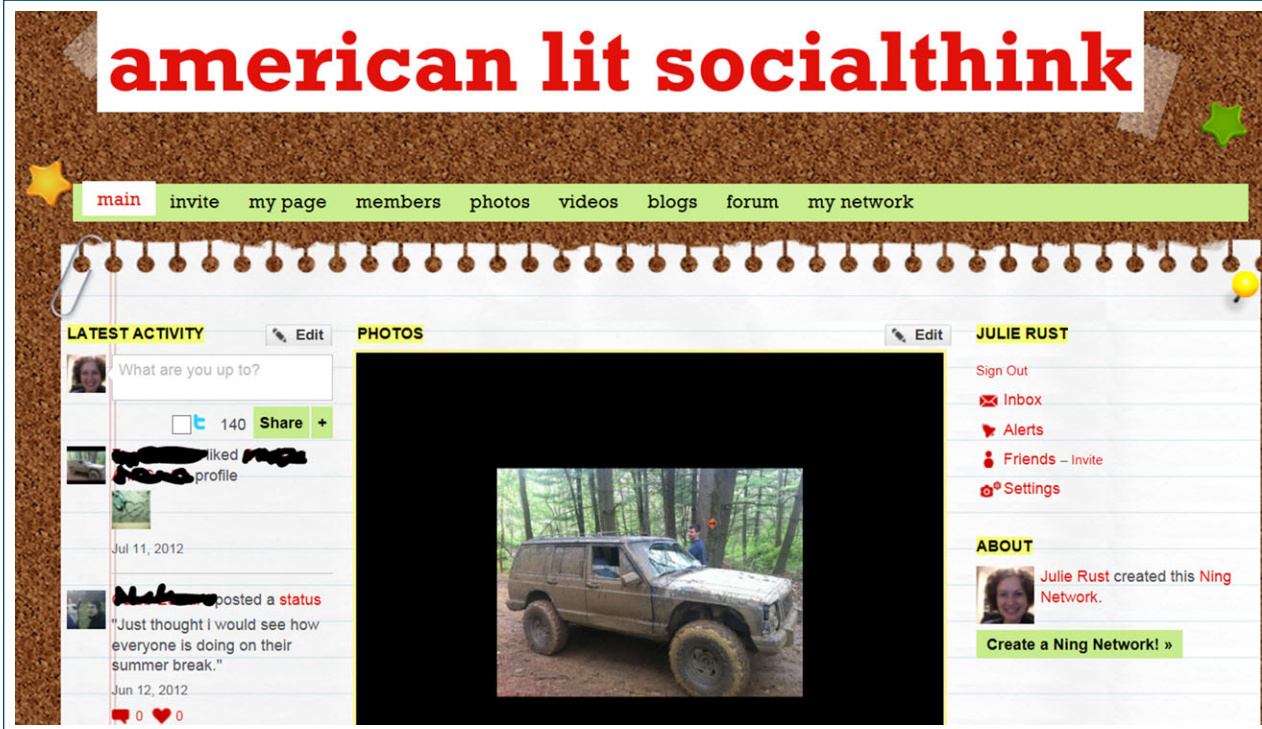


TABLE 1 Uses of Classroom Ning

Use...	Initiated by...	Link to traditional curriculum
Literary Blog (blogging about independent reading)	Teacher (required)	Blogs replaced response journal for students reading <i>Anna Karenina</i> independently to enable collaborative discussion.
Storehouse for Multimodal Projects and Project Reflections	Teacher (required)	Rather than taking a traditional essay test, students in small groups created digital videos portraying <i>Wuthering Heights'</i> predominant mood and then uploaded the video to the Ning, along with a written reflection analyzing their own design decisions.
Status Updates to Comment on Play or Movie	Teacher (voluntary)	While viewing the movie version of <i>Streetcar Named Desire</i> , students posted status updates in real time responding or reacting to events and characters in the scenes.
Forum Conversations on questions posed by teacher	Teacher (required)	Rather than simply having large-class discussions about deep themes in a novel, such as "the origin of evil," (to make sense of the unjust events in <i>The Crucible</i>) students discussed the ideas collaboratively through typing on the forum before orally discussing.
Blogging In-Character/ Commenting in-Character	Teacher (required)	Rather than writing an essay on characterization in Goethe's <i>Letters to Werther</i> , students were assigned a character to blog in the perspective of. Students also commented on each other's blogs in-character.
Messaging Feature (to assign grades and give feedback privately)	Teacher and Students	
Liking Posts	Students	
Friending Each Other	Students	
Uploading Profile Pictures	Students	
Uploading Gallery Photos/Links/Movies	Students	
Awarding Each Other Ribbons	Students	
Creating own Forums/Clubs	Students	

identity-cultivation tactics on the Ning network coalesced in ways that were experienced with tension in comparison to traditional English-class participation.

Findings

Through my analysis, it became quickly apparent that the dance between the space of the school-based Ning and the resulting student tactical participation (inserting popular culture knowledge, wit, and gossip) elicited opened the door to particular foregrounded identity enactments that were typically not privileged in traditional academic essays. Exploring

the ways in which the medium of the class-based social networking site especially prompted and/or allowed these tension-evoking identity-engagements to surface may help to shed light on the important work that students accomplish with new media in the classroom alongside pure curricular standards... the work of cultivating a particular image of self among an audience of teachers and peers.

Tactic 1: The Use of Popular Culture

Throughout the Ning site, whether through images or words, students were tactical in their provision of cues that indicated that they were "in" on current

trends in fashion, music, athletics, and other venues of popular culture (Williams, 2008). The images in Table 1, for instance, feature a popular rapper with a reputation of being a womanizer and a pair of trendy, expensive shoes; these were spontaneously uploaded to the Photo Gallery function on the Ning site, a widely utilized feature in which users could upload images to be featured in a medium-sized frame at the top-center of our Ning site at discrete intervals. We as teachers had *strategically* avoided pointing out this feature to students in fear that this would distract them from the official literary work at hand, but they immediately gravitated toward it.

Others used allusions, particular in the Ning status updates commenting on *Streetcar Named Desire*, to mark themselves and those that “get the reference” as culturally savvy. Status updates on the Ning platform show up as a running stream of comments on the left side of the screen; students have the potential to “like” someone else’s comments by clicking on a “thumb’s up” icon. Posted status updates are accompanied by the profile picture and name of the student so they are easily traced to the source, and because we used them in the classroom for students to respond to a shared experience (such as watching a movie), they often morphed into synchronous conversations with Twitter-like conventions.

Many of these more “under-the-radar” tactical references were most likely under wraps because of their school-appropriateness level. Trey’s two status updates below were posted in reference to Blanche in some of her more flirtatious scenes, incorporating the somewhat questionable song lyrics popularized by Kanye West:

Trey’s Status Update: la la lamborghini mercy,
yo chick she so thirsty (*1 like)

Trey’s Status Update: im in that two seat lambo
whicha girl she so thirsty (*1 like)

Here, “thirsty” refers to a woman who is trying too hard to get sex, which, although potentially an accurate comment on Blanche’s character, is the type of highly sexually charged comment that may be perceived by many teachers as slightly inappropriate for the school context. As students tactically pushed the line of what we felt was appropriate, we teachers used the strategy of being more present on the Ning (enacting the virtual version of physical proximity), posting our own status updates to model our reactions to the movie.

Students’ backchannel, underground use of popular culture, feels quite different from the literary blog posts described previously, as it highlights the ways that students tactically seek to communicate directly with their peers in ways that may or may not be seen as subversive or questionable by authority figures or traditional school expectations/rules. In this case, the main norm rules dictating this type of participation require a small subset or affinity group that shares the same popular cultural knowledge who will “get” the reference without being offended. Such evidence affirms Hagood’s (2012) findings that youth use popular culture to

destabilize identities that limited their options and constructed them from being recognized as someone else, someone different, someone contradictory to another identity they held. They even attached their pop culture uses to their attempts to push against structures and to reshape identity. (p. 158)

While Trey isn’t completely changing his “heterosexual male” identity in his allusions to the lyrics, he is destabilizing the traditional academic self he might promote in more traditional essay spaces.

This section established ways that students used the tactic of making loaded, popular allusions to establish themselves as “in-the-know” of a particular discourse community. But typically, their brandishing of cultural capital accomplished more than just “looking trendy”; many times, as in the examples mentioned, trendiness combined with humor, sarcasm, or wit, the subject of the next foregrounded identity tactic.

Tactic 2: The Use of Wit

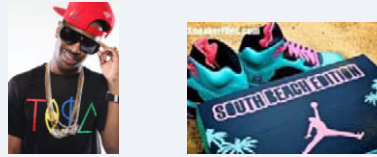
“Being funny” was, in fact, the strongest discourse throughout uploaded pictures, status updates, and replies on the Ning. There are many varieties of humor that surfaced. For instance, students sometimes foregrounded the “silly” side of humor, while other times their humor tended toward the subversive. It is unsurprising, then, that de Certeau (1984) describes “wit” as a “tactic” that “boldly juxtaposes diverse elements in order to suddenly produce a flash shedding a different light on the language of a place to strike the hearer” (pp. 37–8).

One place to locate types of humor was in the profile pictures (see Table 2), which functioned as tactical virtual self-representation markers, socially embedded in the lives of the population that made up

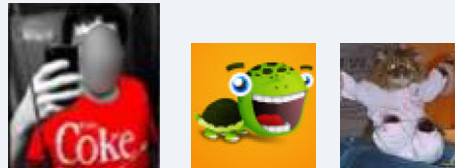
TABLE 2 Identity Practices Via Image

Purpose**Images**

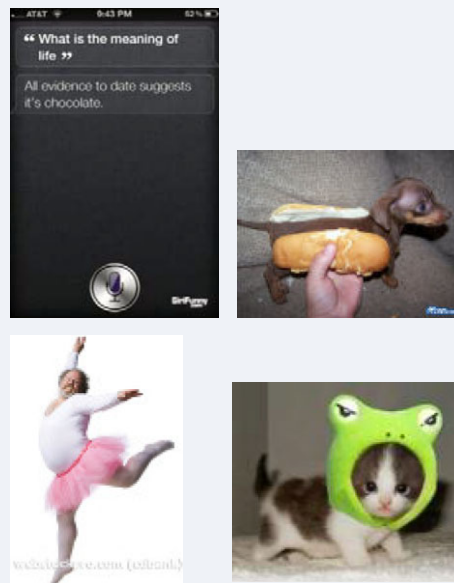
Trendy Identity



Humorous Identity: Profile Pictures



Humorous Identity: Photo Gallery Pictures




students' biggest Ning audience... their peers. The profile pictures students chose to upload accompanied nearly every Ning contribution they might make (forum, blog, status update) in the form of a small square on the side. Because students uploaded these spontaneously immediately upon first logging in on the Ning, without invitation from the teacher, they are a perfect example of how students tactically remade the space to be their own. Cameron features himself sticking his tongue out at himself in the mirror. When asked why he chose this particular picture, he explained: "I always stick my tongue out for some reason. That's my silly side. That's just what I do. It's just me." Other students chose profile pictures to convey their silly nature with images from the Internet. Becky's profile picture of the turtle featured the "cute-humorous" discourse, while Elliot chose a

photograph from the wildly popular genre of online cat pictures.

Students went beyond just uploading funny profile pictures when first joining the Ning site; they quickly began uploading images to the photo gallery to convey their sense of humor. Table 2 highlights the range of images students find funny, for a variety of reasons: a joke about chocolate being the meaning to life, a picture of a dog in a hotdog bun, an image of a overweight man in a ballet tutu, and another cute cat picture. While these pictures aren't as directly linked to identity practices as a profile picture choice, it is clear that students are building social capital and making statements about themselves (via what they find funny) through these uploads.

The new media classroom space of the Ning also enabled students to express their sense of humor

FIGURE 2 Student-Initiated Use of Wit



EXCLUSIVE CLUB OF EXCLUSIVENESS FOR EXCLUSIVE PEOPLE

Posted by [User] on January 20, 2012 at 2:47pm [Send Message](#) [View Discussions](#)

hey guys you need to know the password to get it first


Tags: [can't](#), [if](#), [join](#), [probably](#), [think](#), [you](#)

[Like](#)

[Share](#) [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#)

Views: 29


REPLIES TO THIS DISCUSSION



Reply by [User] on January 24, 2012 at 1:58pm

yee...


[Reply](#) [Message](#) [Edit](#)



Reply by [User] on January 24, 2012 at 1:59pm

hey


[Reply](#) [Message](#) [Edit](#)



Reply by [User] on January 24, 2012 at 1:59pm

Hey Pli, isn't Tin so wacky?


[Reply](#) [Message](#) [Edit](#)



Reply by [User] on January 30, 2012 at 2:07pm

Man this dude is CRAAAAAAAZY

[Reply](#) [Message](#) [Edit](#)



Reply by [User] on January 30, 2012 at 2:41pm

RAWR

[Reply](#) [Message](#) [Edit](#)

through play and manipulation of discourse (hashtags, etc.) and other Ning features. A perfect example can be found in Trey's sarcastic creation of The "Exclusive Club for Exclusiveness" featured in Figure 2. We as teachers strategically utilized the Ning forum feature in traditional IRE (initiation, response, evaluation) patterns as we posed questions to trigger virtual discussion and responses. Trey co-opted the same forum space to engage in some social banter with his friends. Such "technological playfulness" (Alexander, 2006, p. 45) resonates with Maybin's (2007) observations of "highly collaborative, playful" activities not tied to

the official curriculum within the classroom, which were "closely embedded in children's local negotiations of relationship and identity" (p. 6).

This kind of playful identity work, however, wasn't always just "child's play." Other times, students hijacked "serious academic" virtual spaces and purposes in "funny" ways to make sexually charged statements. Rick, for instance, posted a status update on the Ning while watching the movie version of *Streetcar Named Desire*, calling attention to a scene in which Stella stuffed some money into her brassiere: "Nice pocket for holding money Stella" (1 like.)

Trey, of course, had to reply to his joke with a friendly jab: “i knew you would say that rick.” Humor often involved playing around with hetero-norms. For instance, it was perceived as funny by several in the class when Scott, who identified himself as heterosexual, to post: “what a sweaty hunkalicious fellow Stanley is!” (1 like).

Kevin, a very well-liked student, was perhaps one of the most consistently humorous, and he often made sexual allusions in his posts: “stanley is acting like the security at the airport. What next, a stripsearch?” Sarcasm often dripped from these posts. Scott quipped, directly to his peers: “Guys, this scene is waaay too promiscuous for us... .” His friend Zach couldn’t resist a jab of his own in a reply to the post: “This whole movie is too promiscuous for you Zach.” It is notable that most of the humorous posts came from males (who all sat together) in English 10H, and that their type of humor was often unsanctioned or in tension with the type of humor the classroom teacher and I felt comfortable with. Perhaps anticipating the informality these status posts elicited, the teacher and I strategically decided beforehand not to grade this participation, and we even made it voluntary for students to participate.

Whether innocuous and silly or slightly subversive, students were quite interested in being perceived as humorous by their peers, which at times directly clashed with our teacher plans and objectives. As teacher-figures in this space, we strategically measured whether or not this participation increased engagement with the literary texts or was too distracting from “the real work at hand.” It wasn’t until later reflection that we began to consider the way some comments made “in fun” might harm or silence others in the class.

Tactic 3: The Use of Gossip

One final tactic that students utilized to represent themselves involved an intentional distancing of self from characters, personalities, or beliefs that surfaced in the books and ideas they were asked to discuss and interrogate in the blog. “Gossip” here refers not to gossip about other members in the class, but to a mass embrace of gossip discourses regarding characters in the plays and books students were asked to write about. This type of engagement was generally found (although not limited to) when teachers invited students to use platforms that limited the amount of text (Twitter, Ning status updates) and that elicited “instant gratification” from peers’ likes or comments, as

in the string of status updates below that were created as English 10H students watched a film version of *Streetcar Named Desire*:

“Blanche is so #weird” (Anne)

“Wow... Blanche is really needy... .” (Kate)

“Blanche needs to take a chill pill.” (Kate)

“how did stella hook him?! #ten” (Ellie)

“I’ve met teenage girls who are more mature than stanley #growup” (Ellie)

“Someone get some soap for stanley’s mouth #curse much” (Rick)

“Does Blanche really think poker is interesting? #She just wants to get with the guys!!!” (Kelly)

“Stella has cankles.” (Kate)

“dont talk with you mouth full bro #callinyou-out” (Trey)

“Mitch’s tie looks strange” (Cathy)

“Mitch is soo awkward.” (Kate) *1 like

Notice the ways in which critical comments about specific characters seem to snowball all at once; once one student posts an update criticizing a character, many follow. This signals a mob mentality of sorts, one that seems to specifically enter virtual environments, even when contributors are not anonymous. Although the classroom teacher and I never mentioned critiquing the movie or characters during these updates (we just asked students to record their reactions to the movie and play), there was a clear discourse of judgment and lack of empathy. While it is clear that these snowballing critical comments did reveal a certain amount of engagement and “paying attention” to plots and characters, it does appear that there was a distinct lack of imaginative engagement or empathy for the characters born out in these posts. Our teacher strategy to cover the standards by fostering character analysis and critique seemed to be backfiring on us; the online platform seemed to especially encourage a snowballing of judgmental comments, specifically regarding physical appearance.

Discussion

This deliberate probing at tensions is done, not in the spirit of denying the inspiring work teachers are

doing with new media in the classroom, nor in the spirit of discouraging others from integrating more technology into existing curricula. Rather, this data illuminates the complexity involved in adapting social networking platforms into classroom spaces and honors the preparation and support teachers and policy-makers need in this endeavor. Framing students' surprising virtual class participation as *tactical* changes the conversation from being simply dismissive of youth "messaging around" on the computers to recognizing the deliberate and sometimes unsettling functions that their playful social-identity engagements can have on both learning and interacting.

There is something compelling about the way that these three playful tactics (inserting popular culture, humor, and gossip) enabled students to compose a virtual self that looked more like their "Facebook selves" and less like their traditional "English class selves." As students designed selves for Ning participation, they redesigned the very space of the Ning from the teacher's initial purposes to satisfy their more urgent social purposes. While the classroom teacher and I employed strategies on the Ning such as surveillance (teacher commenting and monitoring on the Ning) and rubrics (explicitly designating categories and point allocations for literary blogs) to maintain a traditional paradigm of schooling, students found more opportunity in cleverly manipulating the space with "clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of discipline" (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiv).

It is important to point out that students' identity tactics did not necessarily detract from their engagement with curricular standards, but they did transform the atmosphere of the space housing this engagement from more formal to informal. This introduction of popular culture, humor, and gossip into classroom spaces is alive with problematics around what is collectively agreed upon as appropriate, productive, and affirming for students in these spaces. The question, then, becomes urgent for teachers working to integrate new media into a standard-packed, accountability-filled climate... what do we do with this at times unsettling student participation? Should we make room for popular culture, wit, and gossip, or should we guard against it?

Implications: Tactical Teaching

Because literacy classrooms are places where students hone communication skills for their future success in an increasingly digital world, avoiding less-established, more-complicated spaces for communication (such as the Ning) is irresponsible. Instead, Moje (2004/2011) theorizes that educators "should provide young people with opportunities to learn to navigate these spaces both strategically and tactically and to help them build portfolios that allow them to access other spaces" (p. 37).

Rather than taking an overly utopian stance on new media in classrooms, however, educators must recognize both the potential and pitfalls that exist when students bring their life spaces to classroom spaces through the vehicle of new media. Engagement can increase as informal conventions are embraced; students do find themselves making authentic connections between canonical texts in their everyday vernacular. Yet, the identities students reflect virtually can make teachers feel uncomfortable for good reasons: popular culture allusions may be sexist; humor may promulgate various prejudices; and gossip about characters may trigger a troll-like mob mentality. The challenge for teachers, then, becomes a question of how to co-create new media spaces for identity-engagement with students that are safe, purposeful, and authentic for all involved.

This article has conceptualized teachers' practices to maintain the standards, curricula, and traditional schooling practices as *strategies* and students' practices to reshape traditional school spaces and school-sanctioned identities as *tactics*. But if teachers choose to integrate new media into their classrooms, this data illustrates the need for *tactical teaching*, the responsibility for teachers to work alongside students to co-construct new learning spaces amid the constraints of schools, curricula, standards, and various expectations of stakeholders. Potential teaching tactics include rethinking the ways students might use humor to make meaning of content and self; explicitly confronting inappropriate participation by students as consciousness-raising, teachable moments; and shaping self-inquiry projects during which students critically analyze their own identity practices on social media platforms. Table 3 highlights more practical teacher tactics for negotiating the complex interplay between the official curriculum and new media spaces, teacher purposes and student purposes.

TABLE 3 Tactical Teaching in Classroom Social Networking Spaces

Teacher tactic	Explanation
Enlist a variety of experts and sources to help you find the best social media platform for your students and learning objectives.	Consider the number of features you want students to use, the price or accessibility of the platform, how intuitive it is to use, etc. If you've never used a site like this in class before, it may be wise to begin with the one your school corporation has adopted.
Model and think-aloud with popular culture, humor, and multimodal texts.	Because students will be making humorous popular culture connections and allusions, they need scaffolding and modeling on how to do so in appropriate and illuminating ways.
Take humor seriously.	Through class discussion, freewriting, and small group discussion, have students consistently interrogate the serious implications of "just joking around" online. Employ critical lenses, and empower them to consider which perspectives are being marginalized or left out.
Promote a broadened definition of literacies; remix the curricula.	Consider spending time discussing the way that professionals use Twitter for business, the norms for discussing literary topics on a blog or forum, etc. These are topics that deal with communication, and may end up being just as relevant as the five-paragraph essay!
Learn about what students are doing with social media outside of class. Try it out.	Because platforms and norms change quickly, make it your mission to stay current on the platforms and functions students are making use of outside of class. And don't just observe; participate.
Encourage empathy and imaginative engagement in digital participation.	As a class, view examples of "trolling behavior" online. Discuss what drives humans to behave in this manner, and encourage students to develop their own "etiquette for the 21 st century" for social media usage.
Balance freedom with structure.	Play around with the amount of structure students require to perform their best. Rubrics, guidelines, handouts, examples, suggestions, and direct modeling can be helpful when also balanced with opportunities for creativity.
Intentionally engage the critical-ethical perspectives of students.	When you aren't comfortable with student contributions, stop everything and have a class discussion about norms, equity, and communication. Bring in articles about the "gray areas" in freedom of expression.
Make space for authentic inquiry.	Empower students to critically inquire by having them do research into their own digital footprint. Have them report back about the identity statements they are making on their social media sites.
Construct real audiences.	Push student products and contributions outside of just the class. Widen their circle of influence. Make real to them how their comments might come across to a variety of people with a variety of experiences.
Get creative with assessment.	Experiment with various forms of assessment to see what best-motivates students. Should you grade on the number of their posts? The quality of their thoughts? Their mastery of objectives? Should you give them a grade on it at all? Should students grade themselves or peers? Should "humor" be a new category on your rubric?
Empower students to participate in "real life" online spaces.	Help students find social media sites that best fit their needs and interests, ones that connect them with mentors and experts that matter to them.
Make room for play.	Don't automatically assume that silly profile pictures or funny contributions are just distracting or wasting time. Playful students are engaged students. Capitalize on the interest and build a bridge to the content.

When teachers get tactical, their purposes can intersect in productive ways with students' tactics. Because students are capable of simultaneously making sense of self and the curriculum, educators can work towards shaping spaces for learning in which the two can peacefully co-exist. But making room for the insertion of popular culture, humor, and gossip in digital classroom platforms requires a very-present teacher, one who is willing to collaborate in the tactical re-making of spaces and selves.

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Take Action

STEPS FOR IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION

Consider using a platform like Ning, Moodle, or Wikispaces in your literacy classroom to capitalize on the affordances of harnessing social media for school. Some ways you might best empower students to explore their identity as academic digitally literate scholars include:

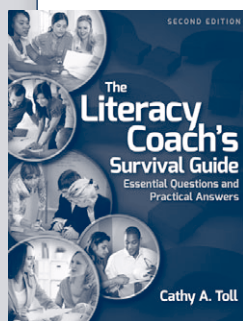
1. Expose students to a variety of blogs and have them cultivate their own blogging voice and topics. Encourage them to include images, hyperlinks, videos, etc. to increase the authenticity of their experience.
2. Utilize the quick, engaging nature of "status updates" and the background knowledge your multitasking students have in writing them. Have students status update as they watch videos, read plays, etc.
3. Incorporate opportunities for students to network with each other by providing space and modeling appropriate ways to respond and provide feedback to each other's blogs, updates, etc.
4. Promote perspective-broadening and imaginative play by asking students to take on roles of other historical figures, characters, members in the classroom, etc. when writing blogs.
5. Provide space in the classroom to reflect upon the ways they are promoting themselves on both out-of-school and in-school digital spaces.

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More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

- ✓ Youtube on creating a Ning for Your Classroom: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIJFZxMHADk>
- ✓ Fresh Air Podcast on Youth’s Digital Identity Practices: <http://www.npr.org/2012/05/24/153576212/keeping-your-kids-safe-online-its-common-sense>
- ✓ Read, Write, Think: Using Microblogging and Social Networking to Explore Characterization and Style: <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-microblogging-social-networking-1171.html>
- ✓ Teaching English with Technology: <http://tewt.org/index.php/lessons-activities>



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